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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000073

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: MAIN ALEVI ORGANIZATIONS BOYCOTT PM
ERDOGAN'S IFTAR

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ANKARA 00000073 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, reasons 1.4 (b),
(d)

11. (C) Summary: Turkey's main Alevi organizations boycotted a January 11 Muharram iftar organized by Justice and Development Party (AKP) MPs as outreach to Alevi communities. They saw the event as "Sunni-centric", aimed at assimilating Alevis into mainstream Sunni society, and demonstrated their ire by threatening the extraordinary community step of "ostracizing" Alevi participants. About 800 guests reportedly attended, the majority of whom were AKP deputies rather than Alevis. Erdogan's outreach was well-intended but clumsily implemented and surprisingly naive: the approach indicated a lack of understanding of the disparate nature of Turkey's largely secular Alevi groups. Erdogan's promise "not to remain indifferent" to Alevi demands was undercut by his claim that he hadn't heard their oft-repeated requests for more equitable treatment for their religion. Until now, they may have talked but he truly may not have listened. End summary.

Participants Say Iftar a Historic Outreach Event

12. (C) Approximately 50 Alevis from several organizations risked shunning to attend a January 11 AKP-hosted iftar held to commemorate the Muharram month of mourning. Participant Kurtcebe Noyan told the press, "This iftar was a first in the Republic's history. Erdogan made remarks that could help thaw the ice between the state and the Alevi community. He proved that the state has adopted a brand new stance toward the Alevis." Alevi Professor Osman Egri told us the event was part of a wider governmental effort at Alevi outreach that includes establishing a training center for Alevi dedes (spiritual leaders) and his own project of publishing books on Alevi history through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet).

13. (U) AKP MP Reha Camaroglu, an Alevi advising Erdogan on Alevi issues, said the event was meant to launch AKP's broader Alevi outreach efforts (reftel). He expected a number of groups to boycott, particularly groups that suspect AKP has a hidden religious agenda and is merely vote-seeking.

Those who accused Erdogan of insensitively hosting an iftar when Muharrem is about mourning were disingenuous ultrasecularists who generally shun all things religious. Erdogan is sincerely committed to resolving Alevi problems, Camaroglu claimed.

Main Alevi Groups Boycott AKP's Iftar

14. (U) Turkey's main Alevi organizations and most respected Alevi spiritual leaders boycotted AKP's iftar as a "Sunni-centric" AKP initiative which they said is aimed at assimilating Alevis. Representatives of the Alevi Bektasi Federation (an umbrella organization representing 155 associations and 35 foundations), the Cem Foundation, and the European Alevi Confederation told us Erdogan and Camuroglu organized an elaborate Sunni-style dinner during which they declined to discuss the Alevi problems that AKP has ignored for years. Alevis traditionally fast and mourn for 12 days in memory of Hussein's death at Karbala and the sufferings of the 12 Imams, and break their fast at a modest gathering of friends and neighbors. In a joint press conference prior to AKP's iftar, dedes (spiritual leaders) from these groups jointly condemned the event and stated they would shun Alevis who participated.

15. (SBU) Alevi leaders harshly criticized Alevis who attended. Pir Sultan Abdal Association President Kazim Genc told the press Alevi groups that participated were either "fake associations" or groups whose leaders had already been excluded from the Alevi community. He noted that PM Erdogan did not use the word "Alevi" even once during his speech at the iftar. Hussein Gazi Association's Ali Yildirim claimed no respectable Alevi attended.

ANKARA 00000073 002.2 OF 002

Boycotting Groups Question PM's Sincerity

16. (SBU) Alevi groups maintain the PM demonstrated his insincerity toward resolving Alevi demands when he told the press January 13 that the Prime Ministry had not yet received a request to consider cem houses as temples -- a long-standing Alevi demand. If there were such a request, Erdogan said the government would take necessary steps, including in the context of constitutional reform, to solve the problem. Representatives from the Cem Foundation skeptically noted that the Prime Ministry in 2005 had received and rejected that very request. In the past, GOT officials have used the excuse that it was not possible under current Turkish law. The Cem Foundation appealed to the Ankara Administrative Court, which on January 11 -- the same day as AKP's iftar -- unanimously denied their appeal. The court ruled that no place other than a mosque can be deemed a "place of worship" and receive a share of the GOT budget.

CHP Tries to Fill the Void

17. (U) Opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Deniz Baykal was quick to use the iftar controversy for his own outreach to Alevis, an important segment that traditionally votes for CHP. On January 13, he invited Alevi organizations to eat ashure (the traditional Alevi Muharram meal) at CHP headquarters, saying the Alevi community can overcome the grief of the killings of Imam Hussein through unity and solidarity.

Reactions from Media and Academia

18. (C) Several commentators welcomed the iftar as a positive step. "Aksam's" Ismail Kucukkaya praised the PM and Camuroglu for organizing the "historic event." "Radikal's" Murat Yetkin said Erdogan's attendance at the dinner was a

very positive step despite criticisms.

¶9. (C) Academic experts on Alevi issues told us the event's "clumsy" organization caused the initially constructive outreach initiative to backfire. Professors Aykan Erdemir (Middle East Technical University) and Tayfun Atay (Ankara University) described the event's organizer, Camuroglu, as a "brilliant intellectual" who, as an inexperienced politician, failed to take into account the political complexity of the issue.

¶10. (C) Comment: AKP's iftar revived Alevi fears of AKP desires to assimilate rather than accommodate them. The Alevi community's strong reaction highlights the work ahead for PM Erdogan if he truly wants to narrow the wide credibility gap that exists between the AKP and fiercely secular Alevi communities. AKP has put forth some groundbreaking proposals (reftel), but will need to fine-tune its apparently rudimentary understanding and approach if it wants to make real progress on winning over the disparate Alevi factions. End comment.

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